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ABSTRACT

This position paper aims to clarify the International Reading Association's stance on methods for teaching beginning reading (i.e., reading methods). The paper first defines a reading method as a set of teaching and learning materials and/or activities often given a label, such as a phonics method, literature-based method, or language experience method. It then advances the position that since there is no single method or single combination of methods that can successfully teach all children to read, teachers must have a strong knowledge of multiple methods for teaching reading and a strong knowledge of the children in their care so they can create the appropriate balance of methods needed for the children they teach. The paper then poses and answers six relevant questions about supporting research; controversy; methods available for teaching beginning reading; and implications of this position at the federal, state, district, and school levels. Contains 12 references. (NKA)

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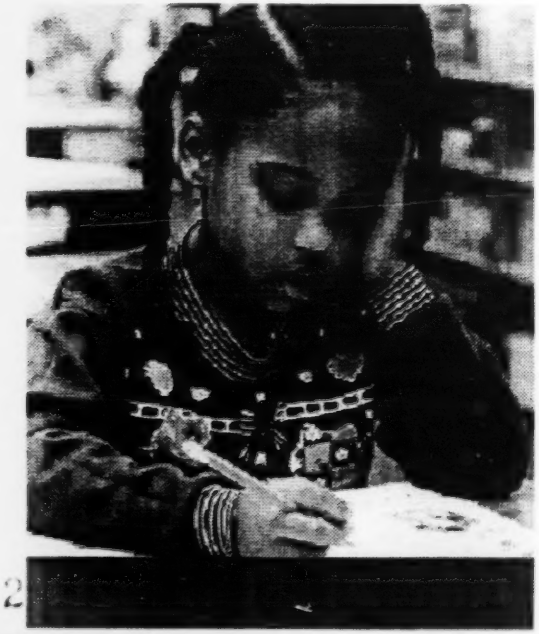
Using MULTIPLE METHODS of Beginning Reading Instruction

A Position Statement of the International Reading Association



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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Historically, methods for teaching beginning reading have been the subject of controversy. The controversy is perhaps as intense as reading is important for the school children who are its focus of concern. Early reading ability influences academic success across the school curriculum, and parents, teachers, and policy makers are right to be intensely concerned. The International Reading Association has developed position statements on several important issues related to beginning reading instruction, including statements about phonics and phonemic awareness as well as a joint position statement with the National Association for the Education of Young Children: *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children* (1998).

The purpose of this position statement is to clarify the Association's stance on methods for teaching beginning reading (hereafter referred to as *reading methods*). A reading method is a set of teaching and learning materials and/or activities often given a label, such as phonics method, literature based method, or language experience method. The essence of the position is this:

There is no single method or single combination of methods that can successfully teach all children to read. Therefore, teachers must have a strong knowledge of multiple methods for teaching reading and a strong knowledge of the children in their care so they can create the appropriate balance of methods needed for the children they teach.

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Is this position supported by research?

There is a strong research base supporting this position. Several large-scale studies of reading methods have shown that no one method is better than any other method in all settings and situations (Adams, 1990; Bond & Dykstra, 1967; Foorman et al., 1998; Hoffman, 1994; Stallings, 1975). For every method studied, some children learned to read very well while others had great difficulty. This is not a new finding. For example, in their report on the First-Grade Studies, Bond and Dykstra (1967) wrote the following:

> Children learn to read by a variety of materials and methods. Pupils become successful readers in such vastly different programs as the Language Experience approach with its relative lack of structure and vocabulary control and the various Linguistic programs with their relatively high degree of structure and vocabulary control. Furthermore, pupils experienced difficulty in each of the programs utilized. No one approach is so distinctively better in all situations and respects than the others that it should be considered the one best method and the one to be used exclusively. (p. 123)

The authors quoted Russell and Fea (1963) to illustrate their claim:

> Thinking in the field has moved away somewhat from either-or points of view about one method or set of books to a realization that different children learn in different ways, that the processes of learning to read and reading are more complex than we once thought, and that the issues in reading instruction are many sided. (p. 867)

Subsequent research has further demonstrated the naiveté of either-or viewpoints, leading Adams (1990) to conclude, "Given the tremendous variations from school to school and implementation to implementation, we should be very clear that the prescription of a method can never in itself guarantee the best of all possible outcomes" (pp. 38–39).

If there is such strong research support for this position, why is there so much controversy?

Perhaps the most important reason for this controversy is that although most children learn to read, there are a significant number of children who do not read as well as they must to function in a society that has increasing demands for literacy. The controversy results because we are not teaching reading as well as we would like to or need to.

A second reason for the controversy is that studies of reading methods are difficult to conduct and the results of such studies are difficult to interpret. Quality methods research meets many standards—such as randomly assigning children, classrooms, or schools to methods treatments; making sure that children spend the same amount of time in reading activities; and making sure that it is the method, and not just good teachers, that is responsible for the effects on the children. Random assignment to a methods treatment occurs rarely. Parents do not look kindly on arbitrary decisions about something as important as reading instruction. Controlling the time spent across classrooms is also difficult given the complexities of scheduling children in schools. And determining whether it is the teacher or the methods that are having an effect means that the same teacher—or teachers who are somehow "equivalent"—must teach the competing methods. (For an extended treatment of this topic see Pressley & Allington, in press.)

Because of the difficulty of conducting good reading methods research, results are sometimes confusing. For most methods some studies find statistically significant differences, some do not find differences, and there are some for which the findings are not conclusive one way or the other. Another reason for the inconclusive results is that some methods may work for some children and not for others.

One of the major difficulties in methods research is defining the term *reading method*, a term that has led to more confusion than clarity. Reading method is a broad label that describes actual classroom teaching in a very general way. Many different activities are used to teach young children to read. In addition, specific arrangements and materials within the classroom environment support children's literacy learning. There are many different ways these activities, arrangements, and materials may be incorporated in a classroom. Not surprisingly, many reading methods combine teaching activities from a number of different sources to develop a coherent program for teaching beginning reading. A given reading method may emphasize a particular aspect of teaching beginning reading and so be said to use a "phonics" method, a "whole language" method, a "code-emphasis" method, a "literature-based" method, or a "meaning-emphasis" method. However, some of the *same* activities may occur in classrooms that use *different* "methods." For example, teachers in both code-emphasis and meaning-emphasis programs may use phonics lessons, read books aloud to children, and have children take books home to read. Often reading methods studies do not give clear descriptions of what is actually occurring in the classroom; hence the particular "method" is not well defined.

Another problem with methods studies is that our measures of what "works" are not defined consistently. What do we mean when we say a method works? In some studies a method works if children are able to read lists of words in isolation. In others "works" means that children can answer questions on a multiple-choice test. If there is anything we have learned from methods studies, it is that children learn what we teach them (Pearson & Fielding, 1991). If we teach them how to pronounce pseudowords, they learn how to pronounce pseudowords and sometimes lists of regular words. If we teach children to summarize, they learn how to give better summaries. Therefore, many methods have a right to claim they "work," but that does not necessarily mean that any of these methods are better than all or most other methods or that any one of them is the "right" method. For all these reasons, beginning reading instruction has been contro[redacted]

Given the difficulty of conducting and interpreting methods studies, what do we know about teaching beginning reading?

Although there is controversy about how to teach children to read, there is less controversy about what it is that children need to learn. A great deal of research evidence converges on the following definition of reading (see also Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998):

> Reading is a complex system of deriving meaning from print that requires all of the following:
> - the development and maintenance of a motivation to read
> - the development of appropriate active strategies to construct meaning from print
> - sufficient background information and vocabulary to foster reading comprehension
> - the ability to read fluently
> - the ability to decode unfamiliar words
> - the skills and knowledge to understand how phonemes or speech sounds are connected to print

A skilled beginning reading teacher is a professional who knows what this definition means, can assess children in light of the definition, and then can adjust the balance of methods so that each child is taught what he or she needs to learn.

[redacted]hat methods are available for [redacted]aching beginning reading?

[redacted] know that a sound and effective beginning [redacted]ding program must incorporate a variety of activities in order to give children positive attitudes toward literacy, as well as the knowledge, strategies, and skills they need to be successful readers. Studies point to a number of instructional practices that can promote young children's literacy learning. All of these practices can be effective, depending on how well they fit with children's needs in learning to read. For example, children who already know letter-sound correspondences are not likely to benefit from training in phonemic awareness (International Reading Association, 1998). Children who can use predictable language to read a book are not likely to benefit from having the teacher read the whole book to them in advance, as in shared reading (Johnston, 1998). The questions of how these activities should be combined and how much time should be devoted to each are best answered through studies in the particular settings of concern. For more information about best practices refer to *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young*

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Children (International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998) and *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Who should decide the content of beginning reading instruction?

Because there is no clearly documented best way to teach beginning reading, professionals who are closest to the children must be the ones to make the decisions about what reading methods to use, and they must have the flexibility to modify those methods when they determine that particular children are not learning. These are the facts behind the International Reading Association's (1998) resolution on policy mandates for reading methods, which includes the following statements:

> If we are to be successful in promoting reading achievement, we must locate decision making at the point of service to students. Broad mandates can intrude on or even replace professional decision making, resulting in instruction that is least responsive to student needs. Ultimately the effects of such mandates are to reduce the quality of instruction in schools and classrooms and to limit the potential for all students to be successful in learning to read.

What are the implications of this position at the federal, state, district, and school levels?

Legislation at the federal and state levels should not prescribe particular methods. At the federal level policy makers should provide resources, particularly for schools and children in high poverty settings, that allow school districts to provide professional development in reading instruction, and that enable them to provide appropriate reading material.

Policy makers also must support further research on successful practice, deriving from a range of perspectives. Policy makers also should support decision-making processes at the state, district, and school level.

Policy makers also should support balanced approaches to reading instruction at the state level. Policy makers should provide funds for professional development. State standards and language arts frameworks should promote a balanced view of reading instruction that attends to all the features of the definition of reading offered here. Policy makers also should provide funding for the purchase of books that children can read on their own and enjoy.

School districts must develop reading programs that meet the needs of all children. School districts should provide guidelines that ensure that all children are allotted adequate time for reading. School districts also should provide the necessary professional development activities so that teachers can provide a balanced approach to reading instruction. School districts must enlist the support of parents in developing teachers' knowledge of their children and involve them in the academic progress of their children. School districts must show, using multiple measures, that federal, state, and local resources have been used to improve children's reading.

We end this position statement with a call issued by Bond and Dykstra (1967) in their report on the First-Grade Studies.

> Future research might well center on teacher and learning situation characteristics rather than method and materials. The tremendous range among classrooms within any method points out the importance of elements in the learning situation over and above the methods employed. To improve reading instruction, it is necessary to train better teachers of reading rather than to expect a panacea in the form of materials. (p. 123)

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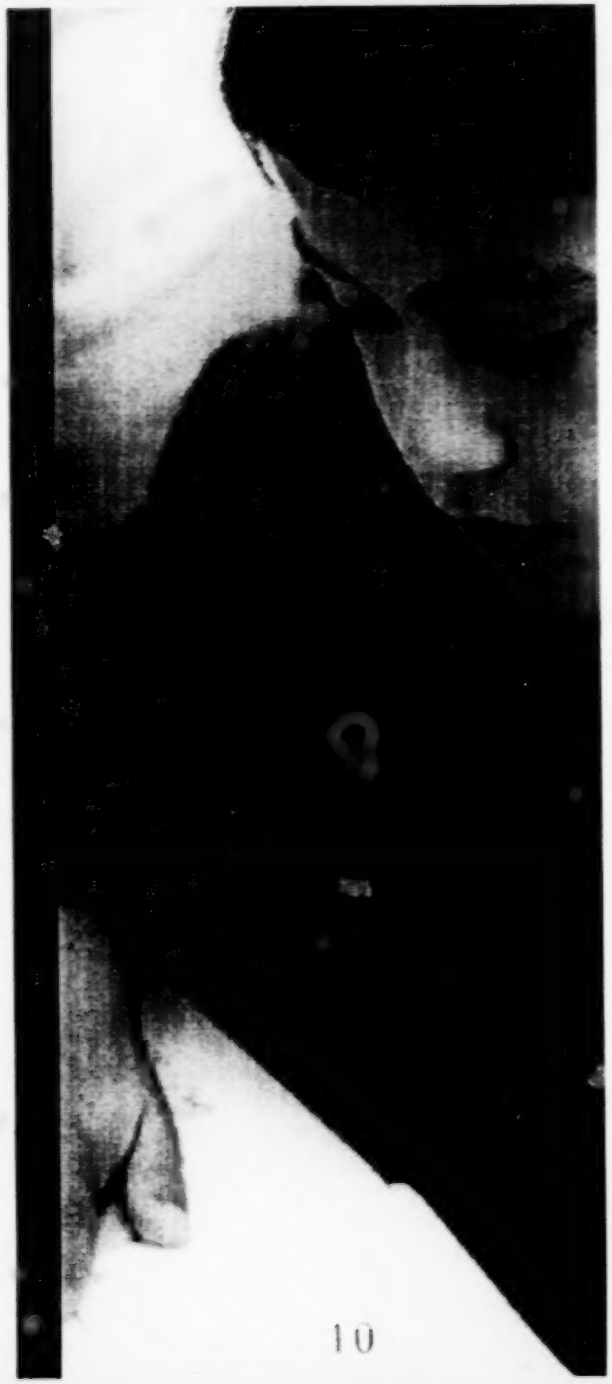

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